

REARING AND RELEASE OF TWO YOUNG AMERICAN KESTRELS (*FALCO SPARVERIUS*)

by

Sheila M. Schmutz

and

Josef K. Schmutz*

R. 1, Box 615

Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin 54494

Present address: Department of Zoology,
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2E1

On 5 July 1973, while banding young American Kestrels on the Buena Vista Marsh in central Wisconsin, we inspected a nest reported to us by a local farmer. It was located in a living white pine (*Pinus strobus*), part of a small clump of trees in an open field. There were several holes along the trunk; one of the uppermost, about 35 feet up, contained five young American Kestrels. All were females infested with ectoparasites. The nest material, presumably from a previous occupant, was very moist. The cavity was so narrow that the young birds were forced to sit on top of each other.

Two of the young were considerably smaller than the others and very weak. We banded, weighed, and measured the three healthy chicks and returned them to the nest but took the two weak chicks home to hand rear. Their age was approximately five days.

For the first few days we kept them in a cloth-lined cardboard box and fed them pea-sized pieces of meat, usually mice, moistened in saliva in the palm of our hands. Soon we fed them larger pieces, including fur and bone. On 8 July we found a pellet in the box.

After spending a few days in the box, the Kestrels were moved to a homemade bird feeder in the front yard of our home in the country. This afforded them sunlight and allowed them to become accustomed to their surroundings. On 18 and 19 July they flew to nearby spruce trees where they perched most of the day. At that time we offered them food at the feeder more frequently than usual, trying to lure them back. One waited an entire day before returning to the feeder. They begged for food, but were reluctant to fly. It was important that they learn to come to us for food instead of having us take food to them, for they might have flown into the nearby woods and we would never have found them. Because we consistently whistled while offering food to them, they learned to associate food with the whistle as well as with the feeder.

Once they began flying, the Kestrels spent increasingly more time away from the bird feeder and became progressively wilder. On 3 August the young birds came in the company of an adult male Kestrel that circled and screamed over our heads while we fed the young. This scene was repeated later the same day. Only one of the young Kestrels appeared on 4 August. On 5 August we did not see them. They returned for the last time on 6 August with an adult male. Within the next ten days we saw them perched nearby on powerlines with other Kestrels. They flushed with the wild Kestrels upon our approach. Apparently, though hand reared, they successfully joined the wild population.

At the time the birds began flying, they both lost weight rapidly, never returning to their preflight weights (Fig. 1), as is common in many species of nidicolous birds (Welty 1962). A similar weight pattern has been reported by Hamerstrom (1972), Holland (1923), and Sumner (1929) for wild Kestrels. These weight curves also indicate that weight is not a good criterion for determining the age of young Kestrels. Even before flying, the weights of the hand-reared birds fluctuated markedly. On 29 July we caught a wild female sibling approximately one quarter mile away from the nest tree. It weighed 114 grams. The hand-reared Kestrels were at least as heavy on that date (Fig. 1).

Acknowledgments

The data for this note were gathered while working on a Harrier population study with Frances Hamerstrom. We wish to thank William McKee for his help in the capture and care of the young birds. We thank Dr. D. A. Boag for comments on the manuscript.

Literature Cited

- Hamerstrom, Frances. 1972. Birds of prey of Wisconsin. Wisconsin Society for Ornithology. 64 pp.
 Holland, H. M. 1923. Young sparrow hawks. *Bird-Lore* 25:185-186.
 Sumner, R. L., Jr. 1929. Comparative studies in the growth of young raptors. *Condor* 31:85-111.
 Welty, J. C. 1962. The life of birds. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company.

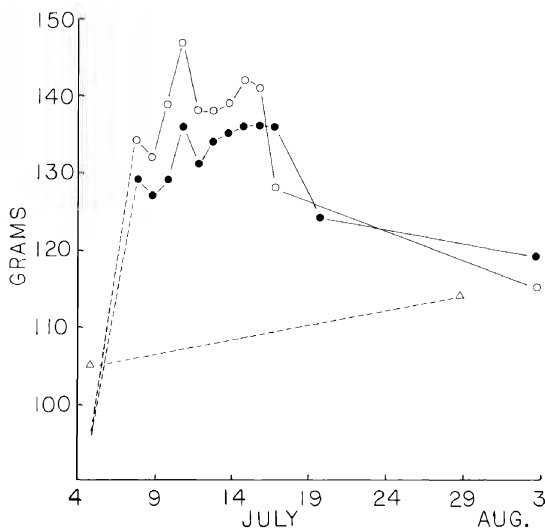


Figure 1. Weights of three young female Kestrels in relation to date. Open and closed circles represent the hand-reared birds; triangles represent weights of a wild sibling.